

Hanover Church
 November 11, 2018
 25th Pentecost, Stewardship Sunday
 “Offering for the Ought”

Mark 12:41-44

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

43Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

Could it be more perfect? I mean how good does it get?

Here we are on the Sunday we receive our financial commitments to the church for the next year, and the passage for this day is the story of the “The Widow’s Offering” or, more famously, “The Widow’s Mite”

So we hear again the story of a poor widowed woman, who shall forever remain anonymous, offering her two small copper coins

Yet even without a name, Jesus makes sure that the sound of those two coins resound throughout the ages

Jesus praises her and lifts her up as the ultimate example of faith because she gives out of her poverty while others give out of their abundance

The message: it’s not about the amount of the offering; it’s about what part of what we have is in the offering

Bada-bing, bada-boom, there you have it: the best stewardship message ever preached, and straight from Jesus!

If I were smart, I would just say: do like the widow and Jesus will praise you, and then sit back down

But, before I do, I must tell you it gets even better

This passage reveals an even deeper and more universal truth about the nature of stewardship

Did you catch verse 44? It reads: **but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had,**

Well, in the original Greek, it actually says: she put in “the whole of her life”

This has been the subject of pledge Sunday sermons from astute stewardship committees throughout history – and rest assured we have such a committee here at Hanover: thank you Karen, Jeff and Ray for all of your work in the service of our stewardship

Our financial resources are only the tip of the stewardship iceberg!

What Jesus wants most from us is our very selves – and not just a part of our selves, but our whole selves

In this most famous stewardship story, Jesus' point is not about the two small copper coins; it is about the complete commitment of a believer who offers her whole self for the work of God

Now, I *really* should just say: do like the widow, Jesus will love you – and sit back down

Except there are a couple of outstanding problems with this story; a couple of things we really need to wrestle with

I'll call them the before and after problems; one on either side of the widow's mite

To raise the before the story problem, listen carefully to the three verses that come just before the treasury scene, while Jesus is teaching in the temple:

38 As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

Moments before Jesus lifts *up* the poor widow, he tears *down* the religious establishment

He accuses them of devouring widows' houses, knowing that in just a few minutes he will give that widow a face

He tells them they will receive the greater condemnation

In no uncertain terms Jesus calls out their hypocrisy and the corruption of the religious establishment

So, you might ask, why would Jesus praise the widow for offering all she has to the very institution that is trying to take everything away from her?

This widow is a victim of a corrupt system and Jesus lifts her up for offering her whole self to support it?

Jesus, what's up with that?

So, there's the problem before the story

Let's turn now to the verses that immediately follow the copper coins ...chapter 13, the first two verses:

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' ²Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

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The after the story problem: Jesus tells the disciples that the temple will very soon be destroyed

There's no mincing words here: not one stone left, and all will be thrown down!

Again?!: Why would Jesus ask people - and then praise them - for giving to a corrupt system that he knows are in its last days

This story might just as well be called "the widow in the middle"

She is stuck between the reality of the church as it is, and the vision for the way it should be

Put another way, she is caught between the is and the ought

What is Jesus up to?

He creates a character who for all of Christian history has epitomized selfless and sacrificial giving – yes it is about her being in 100%

But this story is even more about the focus of our giving

The widow has her eyes on the hills – she is visionary in her giving – she is offering all of herself and all of her resources not for what *is* but for what it *ought* to be

Like the widow, we too get caught between the is and the ought: having to make decisions about how much of ourselves to offer while taking into account the difference between the way things are and the way they ought to be

Our annual pledge is our statement of faith that, by the grace of God, there is a future beyond the reality of this day

We proclaim this day that no matter how bad things may look today, we will offer no less of ourselves because we believe in tomorrow

Our pledges proclaim where we put our hope: they become the resources that pave the way toward the promised fulfillment

Yes, the church is an imperfect vessel

And yet it is the vehicle to which God calls us, and through which the ought will be realized

Now, I really am closer to sitting down

But there is a one more piece of inspiration I'd like to leave you with

In the Presbyterian tradition the church is all about the ought

A congregation in our tradition is not an end, it is the means to an end: God's end

The measure of a congregation in the Presbyterian church is not success or survival; it is faithfulness and sacrifice

Like the poor widow Jesus praises, we are called to offer all of ourselves in service and in ministries that lead to God's righteousness, peace and justice

Hear now the ought of a church in our Book of Order:

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27–28):

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.

May God bless what we give on this day; that it would sustain the church not just in this coming year, but in all of its years to come

May God bless what we pledge on this day; that it would be all of ourselves

And may God bless what we offer on this day; that it would respond to the is and that it would lead to the ought